The Other Utah

Off the Wasatch Front

Rural parts of the state must upgrade the skills of their workforce in order to compete and prosper.

by Michael Hanni

How many microprocessor design engineers are there in Emery County? Not many, but so what? Well, maybe rural Utah doesn't need more of them, but as the national economy becomes more knowledge-intensive, rural parts of the state must upgrade the skills of their workforce in order to compete and prosper.

This transition to the "New Economy" requires a diverse and deep skills base to provide the raw inputs to fuel its growth. For rural areas this means a move away from traditional industries that relied on large numbers of low-skill labor to industries that are more skills-intensive, such as healthcare and professional services.

Breaking with tradition can be tough, but the data indicates that rural American and Utah's nonmetro counties are making their move. The USDA's Economic Research Service has studied the increased skill-intensity of employment in rural America in detail. Their analysis revealed that between 1980 and 2000 the share of low-skill employment for the nation as a whole dropped from 43.4 percent to 35.5 percent. During the same period, rural America's share of low-skill employment dipped from 49.4 percent to 42.2 percent.

These are encouraging numbers as higher-skill jobs, on average, have better pay, benefits, and stability than their low-skill counterparts. Furthermore, employees that can wield skills learned in applied technology and higher education are likely to be more productive, increasing their company's competitiveness in the global market.

Getting closer to home, employment data from Utah's nonmetro-interior counties – Beaver, Carbon, Daggett, Duchesne, Emery, Garfield, Grand, Juab, Millard, Piute, Rich, San Juan, Sanpete, Sevier, Uintah, Wayne – shows clearly how this skills transition picked up steam in the 1990s. During that decade, business and professional services (+154%), healthcare and private education (+68%), and financial services (+26%) all saw solid job increases, while mining – a traditional industry in rural Utah, undergoing its own technological revolution – posted a 7 percent decline.

Educational attainment data from the 1990s reinforces the claim of increased demand for skilled-labor. Based on Census data for people aged 25 years or older, the nonmetro counties saw increases in the number of residents with higher education. Also encouraging, the number of residents with less than a ninth grade education fell sharply. These numbers reflect two realities: increased demand for skilled labor by industry, and the fruits of investment in higher education infrastructure in the area.

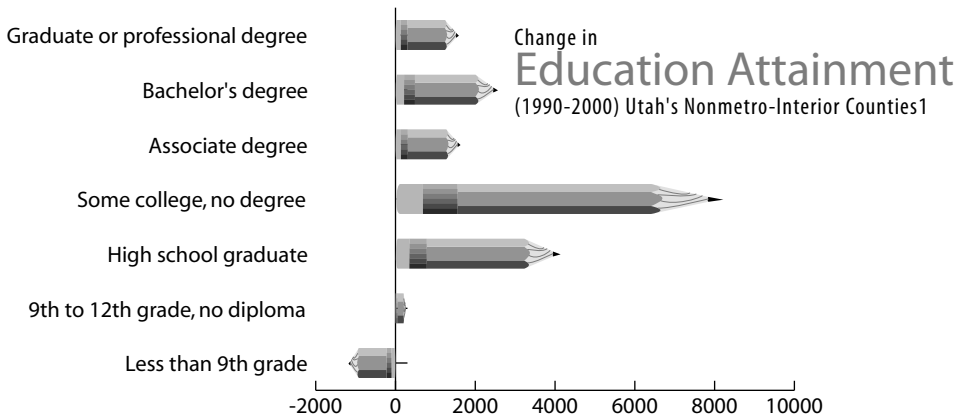
For Utah's rural counties to compete in an increasingly competitive global market, they will need to continue to invest in education programs and educational infrastructure. These investments need to be made even if rural students later leave to find work elsewhere. Those who stay will deepen their community's skill base – an enticement for businesses looking to relocate or start up. For those who choose to leave, we will have the satisfaction of knowing that we provided them with the tools they need fir their long-term success, a very noble undertaking indeed.

Links:

Low-skill to High-skill Rural Employment, Economic Research Service (USDA): http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/November04/Features/lowskilljobs.htm

County-level Economic Data (DWS):

http://jobs.utah.gov/wi/Regions/County.asp



1. Census Data specifically excludes vocational education programs/participants from educational attainment statistics.

Source: US Census Bureau